ATHLETICS OMNIBUS – SELECTING ATHLETES
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Wherever sport is discussed, be it on the sports field, at the barbeque after the competition, or in the boardroom after the competition, there is a strong possibility that a large part of the discussion will be about how the athlete was identified or selected, and reasons will be given how somebody else would have done better in the event.

It is in the very nature of sport to perform. Many members of the society will claim they participate in sport, or are spectators of sport for its social value, yet one of the first things this individual will do after completing the event, is to find out what the time, distance or height was, and will even compare this information with previous achievements, or other people's achievements. Very often the question will be asked: Why was the athlete selected in the first place?

The selection of a representative athlete or team is always attached to a high level of emotion from the athlete involved, the coach, the friends and anybody that think they know better.

When the selection process is based on subjective criteria e.g. I like the athlete, the athlete's performance "looks" good, the attitude of the athlete is "good" or the athlete's relationship with the selectors is "good", the selection process will be left open for severe criticism. If the selection process is based on subjective criteria, the criticism from the general public will probably be justified.

1. THE SELECTION PROCESS

1.1. WHY SELECTION

One of the most basic needs of a human is to survive. In the modern age this need is clearly demonstrated in the human's need to prove that he or she is the best in what they are doing. This need is expressed in many different ways by different people. One of the most popular ways of the human to express their survival skills is through sport.

Millions of people are practising sport on a regular basis and even more want to practice sport. In order to make sport accessible to all, it is important that everybody is given an opportunity to participate in sport.

It is a physical impossibility for everybody to participate at the same time, at the same venue. For everybody to be able to participate in sport, a system of competition opportunities must be developed. This system is called Organized Sport.

Sport administrators will provide a series of competition opportunities to the community to ensure that everybody can participate in sport. The competition opportunities are not all taking place at the same time, at the same venue or under the same conditions.

Not everybody is at any given time at the same level of excellence. A process of elimination is therefore needed to provide an organized environment where people can determine at which level of excellence they are, or to what extend are they able to survive.

It is therefore necessary to create opportunities for people to express their skills at their specific level of skill at the same time, at the same venue and under the same conditions. A selection process is needed to achieve this objective.

Before any form of selection can take place, the objective of what must be achieved, should be identified. It may be:

- To win individual medals at a championship
- To win a team competition e.g. a relay race
- For the social value of team or spirit building exercise
- To encourage an individual to perform better
- To develop a role model in a specific community
- To introduce the sport to a specific community e.g. gender group, culture group.

Specific objective: The most common specific objective for the selection of an individual onto a team is the expectation that the individual will do well while representing the club, school province, country, etc.

General objective: The most common general objective for the selection of an individual onto a team is the expectation that the team will represent the demographics of the club, school province, country, etc.

In both forms of selection, the social value of a person representing a club, school, province or country is important, and the selection process should aim to strengthen the association of the athlete with the team, as well as the community he or she is representing.

1.2. THE CONTENT OF A SELECTION POLICY

The selection process needs to consider a number of factors. The evaluation of performances is only one of the considerations. The following information needs to be specified in the criteria before any selection process is put in place:

1.2.1. Under whose auspices is the event taking place? E.g. International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF).
1.2.2. Who is the host of the event? E.g. Athletics South Africa.
1.2.3. The name of the event that selection criteria will be applicable to, e.g. Championships, Challenge, Talent Identification Meeting, etc
1.2.4. The Status of the event, e.g. national, provincial, etc.
1.2.5. Target group, e.g. seniors, juniors, youth, etc.
1.2.6. Type of event, e.g. Track and Field, Road Running, Cross Country, etc.
1.2.7. The date of the event that selection criteria will be applicable for, e.g. 1 April 2007.
1.2.8. During which period of time must the qualifying performance take place? E.g. in the 6 months prior to the championships.
1.2.9. Type of clothing that must be worn during competition, e.g. club clothing
1.2.10. Which events will not be considered for selection purposes? E.g. events not listed on the published fixtures list.
1.2.11. Special circumstances that can be considered for selection, e.g. an athlete that was ill during the time of the competition.
1.2.12. Prerequisites for consideration for selection e.g. must be a licensed athlete.
1.2.13. Who have the final right of approval of the selected team? E.g. the Athletics Board must give final approval.
1.2.14. Incentives - e.g. athletes who have won medals the previous year are automatically selected for this year's championships, provided they prove their current fitness.
1.2.15. Contact number if information is needed regarding the selection process.
1.2.16. Minimum performance level to be considered for selection - e.g. 100m junior men 11.4 seconds.
1.2.17. Expenses for members that are selected for the team e.g. travel accommodation, food, etc.
1.2.18. Procedure and conditions for withdrawal from a team once selected.

1.3. THE SELECTION PROCESS

Any form of selection process will affect the life and careers of people that are selected positively or negatively. It is therefore important that selectors understand and accept their responsibility to give a true reflection of a person's skills level at the time of selection.

The task of the selector is made easier when information regarding the athlete's performance level is available. The more information available, the more objective the selection process will be.

1.3.1. Level of Competition

The higher the level of competition, the less frequent the competitions at that level will be. E.g. the Olympic Games every 4 years and the IAAF World Championships take place once every 2 years. The National and Provincial Championships take place once a year while development meetings will take place as frequently as once every week.

The selection of teams at high levels e.g. the IAAF World Championships is very challenging simply because of the shortage of compatible information. To obtain more

information to use for the selection process at a specific level of excellence, administrators will organize alternative events that simulate the targeted event.

To obtain information for the National Championships, provincial administrators will organize a Provincial Championships as well as Inter-Provincial Competitions, with the objective to get more accurate information for the selection process.

Likewise administrators will at district level organize Inter-Municipal District Meetings, Inter Club and Inter School Meetings to prepare those athletes for the Provincial and Inter-Provincial Competitions.

1.3.2. Period of selection

The period of selection can only be specified once the event is identified e.g. IAAF World Championships, National Championships, Inter-School Meeting, etc.

The selection period will differ according to the type of event. The longer the event in athletics, the longer the period of performance monitoring will be. Athletes participating in the 100m will participate much more frequently than athletes participating in the marathon.

The marathon athlete is an endurance athlete and needs much more time to recover from a marathon than the 100m athlete. The top international marathon athlete may compete only once or twice per year to allow the body to recover, while the top 100m sprinter may participate as frequently as once every two weeks during peak season.

For the selectors, the performance of the 100m sprinter in the 6 months leading up to the Championships will be a good indicator if an athlete should be selected. In the case of the marathon, the period to be considered may be as long as 2 years.

1.3.3. Performance indicators

The availability of performance indicators is much more freely available than other events. The 100m athlete is competing frequently, and as a result there is an abundance of performance indicators available. Selectors will have performance indicators that will vary from club meetings to performances at national or international level.

It is therefore important to use performance indicators relevant to the level of competition e.g. performances at provincial and inter-provincial level for they took place under similar conditions as the National Championships.

In the case of the Marathon the performance indicators will be less and therefore other types of performance indicators must also be used by selectors.

The Marathon event is an endurance event. Although not the same distance, the ½-marathon can also be used as performance indicators to select a marathon athlete. The quality and volume of the athlete's training programme at the time the athlete ran the ½-marathon can also be a performance indicator. Naturally, consultation needs to take place between the selectors and the athletes, before alternative performance indicators other than the marathon are used to select marathon athletes.

Likewise, it is wrong to use performance indicators, requiring athletes to perform at a National Champions level to qualify for an Inter School Meeting.

Finally, it is fair to assume that if an athlete produces a performance at a specific level, that the athlete will be able to produce the performance again, provided that the date between the last performance and the date of the Championships are not too far apart, or in the case of the marathon that the date of the last marathon performance is not within 6 months prior to the Championships.

1.3.4. When must Selectors meet

The selection process requires the collecting and evaluation of several performance indicators.

In order for a selection process to be objective, the selectors need to meet regularly to compare information.

During the process of comparing information, which may take several weeks, a preliminary team is identified according to the performance indicators. If the Team to the National Championships are to be selected at the Provincial Championships, the selectors should be in the possession of a preliminary team prior to the Provincial Championships. The Provincial Championships should serve as verification of the selection.

This form of verification of the final team allows the Selectors to finalize the final team much sooner and reduces the pressure on the administration process that will follow once the team is selected.

1.3.5. When must a selected team be announced

The date that a team for a specific championship is announced will have a direct impact on the capacity of the selected athlete to produce the required top performance.

The following factors will determine when the team will be announced:

- The capacity of the administrators to present (final preparation) a team
- The final date that athletes can be enrolled for a specific Championships
- The time the athlete will take to "taper" his or her final preparation. This will vary from event to event (100m versus the marathon) and also from level to level of competition (World Championships versus an Inter-School Meeting).

1.4. AN OBJECTIVE SELECTION PROCESS

A selection process is objective when the product of the selection process compares favourably with credible norms of previous performances under similar circumstances.

1.4.1. To win individual medals at a championships

To select an athlete with the intention to win a medal for the club, school, province or country at the relevant championships an objective norm will be to summarize the performances of athletes at relevant championships.

To arrive at an objective norm, the following information is needed:

- The championships the team must be selected for.
- The event the athlete must participate in
- The gender of the event
- The age group of the event

If an athlete is to be selected for the National Championships in the 100m for Junior Men, an objective norm can be arrived at by taking the average performance of the athletes in the 5th position in the final of the Relevant Championships over the past 4 years.

Example:

Year	Level	Event	Gender	Age	Position	Performance
2003	National	100m	Men	19	5th	10.63
2004	National	100m	Men	19	5th	10.64
2005	National	100m	Men	19	5th	10.62
2006	National	100m	Men	19	5th	10.63
					Average	10.63

The average 10.63 is calculated as follows: 10.63 + 10.64 + 10.62 + 10.63 ÷ 4 = 10.63

The reason for using the performance of the 5th position as a norm is as follows:

- If an athlete can achieve a performance equal or better than this norm in a credible competition, it is likely that the athlete will in similar circumstances, repeat this performance at the Championships.
- The norm gives a reasonable guarantee that the athlete will reach the final at the relevant Championships.
- It is an acceptable assumption that any athlete in the final can win the gold medal.

1.4.2. To select a demographically correct team

Any society consists of men, women and children. If a team is to be selected to represent a specific society, the team should represent the demographics of the society.

For the selection criteria to be objective in selecting a demographically correct team for specific championships, an objective norm will be to summarize the performances of athletes at relevant championships, but at a lower level as in the case of the selection criteria for possible medal winners. It must be kept in mind that if the standard for selection in this category is too low, the selection criteria will lose its credibility, and will eventually be detrimental to both the targeted athlete and the targeted society.

This form of selection should only be applied in cases where the selected team does not represent the demographics of the society.

Example: If the population consists of 50% men and 50% women and the team selected consists of 80% men and 20% women, the selection criteria should be adjusted for the women only in an attempt to correct the imbalance in the composition of the team.

To arrive at an objective norm, the following information is needed:

- The championships the team must be selected for.
- The event the athlete must participate in
- The gender of the event
- The age group of the event
- The demographic composition of the targeted society

If an athlete is to be selected for the National Championships in the 100m for Junior Men, an objective norm can be arrived at by taking the average performance of the athletes in the 7th position in the final of the Relevant Championships over the past 4 years.

Example:

Year	Level	Event	Gender	Age	Position	Performance
2003	National	100m	Men	19	7th	10.97
2004	National	100m	Men	19	7th	11.01
2005	National	100m	Men	19	7th	11.03
2006	National	100m	Men	19	7th	11.01
					Average	11.00

The average 11.00 is calculated as follows: 10.97 + 11.01 + 11.03 + 11.01 ÷ 4 = 11.00

The reason for using the performance of the 7th position as a norm is as follows:

- The performance of the athlete in the 8th position is unreliable. There are normally 8 athletes in the final which means the 8th position is the last athlete to finish. The athlete in this position often slows down because he/she realizes he/she has lost the race before the finish of the race.
- The 7th position is much more reliable as a norm. If an athlete can achieve a performance equal or better than the 7th position in a credible competition, it is likely that the athlete will in similar circumstances, repeat this performance at the Championships.
- The norm gives a reasonable guarantee that the athlete will reach at least the semi-finals at the relevant Championships.
- It is an acceptable assumption that any athlete reaching the semi-finals in a championship has the potential to reach the finals in feature championships events.

1.4.3. To select a team for development purposes

Any sport has at all times the need to increase the number of participants in the sport as well as to increase the popularity of the sport. Sports that do not have a development programme in place have a real risk of becoming extinct.

To increase the popularity of the participants in sport the objective of the selection criteria must be to engage as many athletes as possible through participation.

The size of the population may restrict the athletes from participating all at the same time. At any given time there will always be participants, while others will be spectators.

The selection process in the development categories should clarify who is participating when.

For all members of the society to be given an opportunity to participate in sport, the sport must take place as close as possible to where the relevant society is living or working.

In effect, this means that some communities will compete at one venue, and on the same day at another venue, another community will also compete.

Any selection process is based on the assumption that all performances evaluated, took place in similar conditions.

At a National Championships, all athletes participate under similar conditions, and the selection process can be objective, provided that there is an objective system in place against which the performance of the athlete can be measured against.

This is not necessarily true at development level. Athletics meetings do not take place at the same venues, in the same weather conditions or against the same athletes.

This in fact, highlights the importance of rules to be in place that will ensure that all participants participate in relative similar conditions.

If the assumption is that all competitions take place in more or less the same conditions, a process of elimination should be based to eventually determine the best athlete in a community, a region, a province, etc.

The process of elimination will be based on a selection process.

This selection process should be a two tier selection process:

- The winner of each event should have automatic selection into the next round.

  It could be argued that at the lowest levels of competition, the first 3 or 4 athletes should progress to the next round. This in fact will lead to an unnecessary congestion at the next level of competition. It will also lead to a distorted view of the strengths and weaknesses of the sport in a specific community.

- All athletes performing better than a minimum standard will all go through to the next round. This minimum standard is based on the averages of performances at this level. The calculations are done in the same way as in the case of selecting an athlete according to performance. Any athlete performing better that the average 5th position in the final the past 4 years at the relevant level of competition will go through to the next round.
  Example:

Year	Level	Event	Gender	Age	Position	Performance
2003	Inter-school	100m	Men	19	5th	11.60
2004	Inter-school	100m	Men	19	5th	11.70
2005	Inter-school	100m	Men	19	5th	11.60
2006	Inter-school	100m	Men	19	5th	11.50
					Average	11.60

The average 11.60 is calculated as follows: 11.60 + 11.70 + 11.60 + 11.50 ÷ 4 = 11.60

The reason for using the performance of the 5th position as a norm is as follows:

- If an athlete can achieve a performance equal or better than this norm in a credible competition, it is likely that the athlete will in similar circumstances, repeat this performance at the next level and progresses to the final.
- It is an acceptable assumption that any athlete in the final can win the gold medal.

This in fact implies that in the next level of competition, some events may have several eliminating rounds to give all participants the opportunity to progress to the next level of competition. In other events at the same competition there may only be a final event to determine the champion, simply because the amount of athletes that qualified in the previous round justifies only a final.

This system of elimination enables the administrator to determine which area of sport is weaker than others and an attempt can be made to correct the imbalance by providing coaching workshops that have an objective to create a more balanced eliminating process in future.